

Eastern Airlines Flight 401: The Ghosts of Memories Past

by Eric D. Olson

Late in the evening of Friday, December 29, 1972, I was at the old Sun Flying Club located on the east side of Opa-locka Airport in metropolitan Miami, Florida. The Sun Flying Club wasn't really a "flying" club. More accurately, it was a "tie-down" club; the members owned their aircraft and joined the club to be able to tie-down their aircraft at reasonable costs and have access to a ramp area where they could perform routine maintenance on their planes. (The club is still in existence at the Opa-locka Airport, but it was relocated to a different site on the field years ago.) Thirty-four years later, as I sit writing this article in December 2006, I can still visualize the events of that night just as if they had occurred yesterday. At the time, I had no idea of the significance of what I saw nor did I intend to store it away in my memory banks.

The flying club was also a de facto social club with members having the common bonds of flying and aircraft ownership. In short, it was a great place to eat (we used to have outstanding club Bar-B-Q's), "talk" airplanes, perform minor maintenance and fly planes. We also had a habit of informally gathering at the clubhouse on Friday and Saturday evenings to drink beer and catch up on all the news that had any impact on us. Effectively, we turned the clubhouse into the European equivalent of a weekend "pub." It was during one of those sessions that Eastern Airlines Flight 401 crossed paths with me and some of the other club members.

As I recall that December night, it was a relatively cool evening for south Florida with a moonless night sky. Bill Elliott, a sergeant with the Metropolitan Dade County Public Safety Department, and I had been sitting around most of the evening with other club members talking airplane stuff and we ended up being the last two members to leave the clubhouse. Bill, ironically, as well as being the proud owner of a pristine Cessna 180 was one of the helicopter pilots for the Metro-Dade police department. We were standing outside the clubhouse on the ramp, getting ready to lock up the building before leaving, when we both noticed something unusual overhead.

In unison, we looked up to see the silhouette of a Lockheed L1011 flying westbound at an altitude of about 2,000 feet. It was sometime between 11:30 pm and 11:35 pm, a fact that I specifically remember because I took the time to look at my wristwatch and commented to Bill. The underside of the L1011 was reflecting the ground lighting from the airport and the surrounding city which made it easy to identify the aircraft type although we couldn't identify the airline. (The largest L1011 operator at Miami International Airport [MIA] was Eastern

Airlines, but I don't recall seeing any airline markings when the L1011 was overhead.) What was so strange was that it was there in the first place. It was rare for commercial airliners to fly westbound directly overhead Opa-locka Airport at such a relatively low altitude. The control tower at Opa-locka shut down at 11pm each evening back then, but the L1011 had to be in contact with Miami Approach Control since it was probably being vectored for an approach to MIA.

Bill and I left for our respective homes after securing the clubhouse. I was tired and hit the sack as soon as I got home. Bill Elliott had a much more eventful night.

The next morning, as was my usual Saturday routine, I drove to the Sun Flying Club timing it to arrive at approximately 11am. It turned out to be anything other than a routine Saturday! Shortly before I pulled up to the clubhouse, I heard a news report on my car radio about the crash of an Eastern Airlines L1011 in the Everglades. That was the first time I had heard of the crash. By the time I got to the clubhouse, there must have been 10 to 15 members milling about, all discussing the crash. They also told me that Bill had been called shortly after he got home by the police department to come back to the airport for emergency flight duty (the police helicopter unit was based at Opa-locka). He ended up making numerous trips out to the levee where the rescue operation base was located. I think the police helicopter unit was flying Bell Model 47G helicopters at that time which only carry a pilot and two passengers. Bill was essentially tasked with transporting officials from various sites in Miami to and from the Everglades crash scene throughout the night. Obviously, he was home trying to get some rest at noon on Saturday, but he eventually came out to the clubhouse late in the afternoon or early evening.

Speculation at the club was rampant which was to be expected from a bunch of pilots. However, we had one advantage that members of the general public didn't have—we had access to airplanes. Shortly after I arrived, one of my friends, Hansel Meighen, practically dragged me to his airplane and loudly proclaimed that we were going to go fly out to the Everglades crash site. I told Hansel that we needed to check, *before* we got into the air, whether there were any flight restrictions over the crash site. Off I went to check with the FAA Flight Service Station. Sure enough, I recall that the initial restricted area was posted in a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) and set out a no-fly zone that had a one mile radius from the crash site up to 2,000 feet above sea level. (It was later expanded to a much larger area either later that same day or the next day.)

Back to the clubhouse and armed with the airspace restrictions, I was ready to fly. Now for the big decisions—who gets to ride with us? Hansel owned a single-engine Piper Comanche 250, registered as N7510P, that only had seats for four people, including the pilot. He wanted me to be the pilot (no objection from

me) and he would occupy the co-pilot's seat. That left two seats open. I vaguely remember that we ended up taking a total of five people on that flight. That's why Hansel wanted me to fly; it would be my license that got revoked if we got caught, not his! Anyway, the statute of limitations has long since passed. I checked my log book entry for Dec. 30, 1972, hoping it would shed some light on who else was aboard, but all it said was, "Day VFR 'EAL L-1011 crash site' EA 401." Evidently, I wasn't so stupid as to put any regulatory violations in writing in my log book. Good for me! I'm pretty sure that Tom Roche and Bob Crews were two of the "lucky" ones that got aboard, but I couldn't swear to it now.

I don't remember the take-off or the landing that day, but I vividly remember the meteorological conditions and the crash site which was approximately 15 to 20 miles west-southwest of the Opa-locka Airport. It was pretty difficult to find at first. We were like five bobbing bubble-head dolls because there were a lot—and I mean a lot—of other aircraft up in the air doing the same thing we had set out to do. This was only about 12 hours after the L1011 crashed! The flying safety was even more compromised because it was slightly hazy which reduced visibility to seven to ten miles over the Everglades. We could also see a few other aircraft flying into the restricted airspace. Those pilots probably didn't even know there was a NOTAM prohibiting flight immediately above the crash site. I had initially intended to fly a little above 2,000 feet to avoid the restrictions, but I ended up closer to 3,000 feet to avoid the other aircraft. Discretion was the better part of valor.

The Everglades is flat, covered with tall saw grass and immersed in water that ranges from a few inches deep to three to four feet deep in some areas. For practical purposes it's a swamp, a very flat swamp. From a half mile above, it's like an artist's canvas. You can see airboat and swamp buggy trails, animals and animal tracks, "heads" which are isolated dry areas with trees and brush, canals and anything else that disrupts the marshy surface. After we visually established where the crash site was located, we could see the initial ground contact point and the distribution of the wreckage quite clearly. (No one had a camera, so I don't have any personal photos.) It looked as though the L1011 was in a shallow left turn and dragged its left wing tip in the swamp. What happened next must have happened very quickly. My guess is that the L1011 essentially did a flat or horizontal cartwheel and tore itself apart. The largest recognizable pieces of wreckage were the cockpit section and the center engine intake and attached fuselage section. Also notable were the Eastern Airlines two-tone blue and white colors on the larger pieces of wreckage.

I don't recall any large scorched patches of saw grass, but I remember a few small burned areas. Everything else was in small pieces spread in a general southwest or south-by-southwest direction for 1,500 to 2,000 feet. It didn't look as if anyone could have possibly survived the crash, yet 75 of the 176 people

aboard did survive. That was a miracle and is probably attributable to three factors: (1) the crash site was a soft, wet swamp; (2) there was no significant post-crash fire; and (3) the force of disintegration was directed horizontally and not vertically, flinging many survivors out into the swamp instead of subjecting them to fatal blunt force trauma which is characteristic of most airplane crashes.

There was a lot of activity on the ground, but we couldn't see much detail from 3,000 feet. By that time, I think all the survivors had been rescued and taken to local hospitals, but there were a lot of bodies still at the crash site. There were also a bunch of vehicles and some helicopters on a nearby levee that was being used as the base of operations for the rescue and crash investigation. Other than those observations, I don't recall much more from that flight. We exited the area and returned to Opa-locka Airport, but our conversations were subdued. All of us realized that many people had lost their lives and that there was a bit of mystery surrounding why a relatively new L1011 crashed into the Everglades on a clear, dark night. Most of what we talked about on the return to the airport was speculation on our part as to how the plane crashed, not why it crashed. It was a solemn and sobering return flight. My log book shows that our flight lasted 1.2 hours.

Later that afternoon or evening, Bill Elliott came over to the Sun Flying Club where we were all waiting for him so he could let us know what he did and saw. Aside from the initial trouble finding the crash site in the dark, I remember that most of his comments related to the passengers and crew that had been killed in the crash. Bill was a career police officer who had been exposed to death and trauma, but his comments really reflected an attitude of both wonder and sadness. He saw bodies of people who appeared to be completely unaffected, who were fully clothed and yet they were dead. There were bodies that were naked, which we all figured occurred because they had been flung out of the protective environmental cocoon of the L1011 into 200 mph winds when the fuselage broke up. Many of the survivors were also stripped of their clothes and this contributed to medical problems with all the bacteria in the Everglades water and the relatively cold temperatures that night. I especially remember Bill describing passengers who apparently survived the crash impact, but were knocked unconscious and were still strapped into their seats. They had drowned because their seats landed with their heads tilted down into the swamp water. He seemed deeply saddened by that fact. In fact we all were troubled because, by the luck of the draw or fate, some passengers survived while others in similar situations who looked as though they should have survived, were killed. The cruel facts of this disaster only reinforced my belief that you don't die unless it's your time to die. That credo seems to be exemplified in every major airplane crash.

My direct and indirect contact with Eastern Flight 401 didn't end on December 30, 1972. I come from an Eastern family—my late mother, Betty Olson, retired from Eastern in 1976. She worked in the executive offices at Eastern's Miami base. About a year after the crash of Flight 401, she told me that one of the flight attendants who had survived the crash had come back to work at Eastern, but was assigned to the executive secretarial pool while she recovered from her physical injuries and tried to cope with her mental anguish. My mother never told me the flight attendant's name, but she did say that she had suffered a broken back in the crash. Mom apparently worked closely with that flight attendant. According to my mother, her flight attendant co-worker wanted to get back to flying, but she was petrified every time she heard jet noise. In fact, she told my mother that she cringed in fear every time she drove down LeJeune Road (the eastern boundary of Miami International Airport) just because of all the jet noise when planes were landing and taking off. I don't know if she ever did return to flying; my mother never told me one way or the other.

My former brother-in-law, James Anderson, was an avid air boat owner and hunting enthusiast. He was one of those rare south Florida individuals who owned a ton of hunting rifles and lived for the deer hunting season so he could go out on his air boat and hunt scrawny Florida deer in the Everglades. (Deer in south Florida are almost anemic compared to deer in other parts of the country.) Obviously, I'm not a hunter, but I don't begrudge those who do hunt responsibly. James followed all of the rules and more often than not, brought home venison each deer season. His hunting escapades on his air boat meant that he was very familiar with the area where Flight 401 crashed in the Everglades. That area was off limits to hunters and others for a number of months while federal investigators searched the area for clues to the crash. Eventually, the investigations were concluded and most, but not all, of the wreckage was removed or salvaged from the Everglades. It is almost a physical impossibility to find and remove every scrap of wreckage from a swamp. One day, late in 1973, I got a phone call from James telling me to come over to his house; he had something for me.

Little did I expect to see what he actually had. Now that the crash site was again open to the public, he had gone out into the Everglades to scout the area on his air boat. Surprisingly, he found that there were large pieces of wreckage still out in the glades. So, being the thoughtful brother-in-law he was, unbeknownst to me he had collected some of the wreckage of Flight 401. I was amazed at the size of some of the pieces of wreckage he brought home on the air boat. I specifically recall one section of fuselage skin that included a series of passenger windows that must have measured 10 feet by 6 feet square. There were also other artifacts such as yellow airline life jackets and panes of plastic passenger windows.

I told James that I couldn't take the large pieces of wreckage. I didn't tell him that it felt really strange realizing that so much of the plane was still out in the glades. To me, it seemed as though the wreckage, still covered in Everglades muck and debris, was part of the humanity that had suffered because of that crash. The only piece of wreckage I did keep, and which I still have in my possession, is one of the plastic passenger window panes. That simple piece of plastic represents a tie between me and what happened to the passengers and crew on Flight 401 on December 29, 1972. It is personal and it has served over the intervening years to remind me of how precious and tenuous life can be.

I have lost contact with Bill Elliott. The last that I heard, he had retired from the Metro-Dade police department and moved to Brooksville, Florida many years ago. Hansel Meighen died on April 15, 1999, and is buried in Ft. Pierce, Florida. Each year on December 29th, I spend a little time thinking about that silhouetted L1011 heading west over Opa-locka Airport. I'll forever believe that it *was* Eastern Flight 401, just minutes before it and its passengers and crew became part of aviation history and legend. Let them not be forgotten.

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